

### Deciphering political utopias: unions, female night work, and gender justice

Morgenroth, Christine

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version  
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with:  
GESIS - Leibniz-Institut für Sozialwissenschaften

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Morgenroth, C. (2013). Deciphering political utopias: unions, female night work, and gender justice. *Historical Social Research*, 38(2), 71-90. <https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.38.2013.2.71-90>

#### Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY Lizenz (Namensnennung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:  
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.de>

#### Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY Licence (Attribution). For more Information see:  
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

---

# Deciphering Political Utopias. Unions, Female Night Work, and Gender Justice

Christine Morgenroth \*

---

**Abstract:** »Politische Utopien entziffern. Gewerkschaften, Nachtarbeit von Frauen und Geschlechtergerechtigkeit«. The group discussion is a qualitative method perfectly suited for analyzing attitudes and opinions at the supra-individual level and tracing the process of how they emerge. Psychoanalytic group theories expand our understanding of group processes by adding the dimension of the unconscious: groups, too, display defense reactions and forms of repression. By adding this dimension, we can show how social groups proceed to collectively relegate important issues to the realm of the unconscious. In this way, social defense processes are reproduced *in actu*. In group discussions involving female union members, the predicament of working mothers comes to the fore particularly clearly. An excerpt from a group discussion illustrates that the women seem to perceive night work as the only realistic solution to the problem of reconciling work and family. Only when we turn to a psychoanalytic hermeneutics of scenic understanding are we able to reveal a repressed conception of life looming behind the paradoxical demand: the desire to overcome the separation of productive and reproductive labor in the lives of both sexes; a desire that can only be achieved if labor unions, too, perceive gender relations as a political challenge demanding their attention.

**Keywords:** group discussion, scenic understanding, depth hermeneutic, therapeutic group analysis, gender relations.

---

## 1. Introduction

Apart from families, groups represent the closest and most frequent type of social experience in human life. This suggests that research on subjective structure must also consider group influence. Group discussion is an extremely fascinating and many-faceted method of qualitative social research. Its rich potential is fully unleashed in combination with methods of hermeneutical text analysis based on a critical theory of subjectivity. This requires psychoanalytic

---

\* Christine Morgenroth, Leibniz Universität Hannover, Institut für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie, Im Moore 21, 30167 Hannover, Germany; c.morgenroth@htp-tel.de.  
Print Version of: Morgenroth, Christine. 2012. Deciphering Political Utopias. Unions, Female Night Work, and Gender Justice. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 13 (3), Art. 1 <<http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs120315>>.

approaches that allow transcending a frame of reference centered on the individual, which generally underlies the concepts of psychoanalysis. Concepts that seek to capture the formation of subjectivity must take into account the diverse influences that affect personality development and invariably form the subject into a social being. Theories of developmental psychology frequently reduce social influence to that of the family; yet a host of other social institutions exerts a lifelong influence not only on people's attitudes and opinions but also on the development of their personalities and identities. This is especially true in stages of development and situations characterized by pressures to make decisions, conflicts, or inner-psychic challenges when social institutions have an especially strong influence and this influence is actively sought.

In the following, I will give a brief outline of group discussion methods used in research over the past 50 years and introduce a text sequence from my own research as an example. In a subsequent step, I will shed light on psychoanalytic group theories to get a theoretical grasp on unconscious meanings, which are reconstructed using scenic understanding. Finally, the depth-hermeneutic analysis of the text sequence shows that the political utopia at the heart of this sequence can be fully revealed only once the unconscious meaning is comprehended.

---

## 2. Group Discussion in Research Practice

---

More than 60 years ago, the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research presented a remarkable empirical study: "Gruppenexperiment" [Group Experiment] (Pollock 1955). Designated a pilot study, it adapted an approach from research on prejudice to the situation in post-war Germany. The research is specifically interested in the processes of political opinion formation among a generation that had experienced fascism and war.

The Frankfurt pilot study starts from the assumption that the formation of concrete opinions on topics of public interest is subject to the influence of group dynamics. The qualitative approach allows shedding light on the dynamics of opinion formation in a group context.

Pollock's struggle to establish the group as a factor having a function in its own right. For instance, the typical trajectories of group formation are observed from the perspective of what degree of group integration an individual has attained (in interaction with the others). The notion of integration describes the psychic interrelations between individuals resulting in stronger levels of identification among group members so that the group appears as a unity (cf. Pollock 1955, 433). Later on, this approach was further underpinned by Mangold's (1960) work, based on the concept of "informal group opinion among large social groups" (59; my translation).

In the Anglo-Saxon countries, group interviewing methods have developed on very different foundations. There, the focus group has gained widespread use in market and consumer research since the 1940s (cf. Merton and Kendall 1946). It is applied as a low-cost alternative to conducting individual interviews; it serves as a means of focusing individual opinions – the group as a whole is not at the center of attention.

This is clearly different in case of group discussions, which came in use later. Here the focus is on the shared opinions that surface in a group setting; group influences as such become the object of investigation. The method is mostly applied in the context of so-called real groups, that is “naturally occurring groups of like-minded people” (Livingstone and Lunt 1996, 82).

The audience is seen, not as an aggregate of atomized opinions or attitudes, but as individuals located in concrete social groups who construct meaningful social action partly through the discursive interrogation of texts (85).

For these two strands of development, we may say, in summary, that in Germany a methodological discussion has so far largely been conducted in the absence of much practical use of group discussion methods in concrete research whereas in the USA and England such methods have been applied in a host of studies without much methodological reflection (see Fiedler 2002).

In German-speaking countries, group discussion methods were advanced considerably in the 1980s and 1990s by the work of Ralf Bohnsack (1989), who conceives of group discussions as epiphenomena of collective patterns of orientation, which reflect different conjunctive realms of experience. The data is analyzed using the “documentary method” [*Dokumentarische Methode*]. This approach first asks about the content of a statement (“What is said?”) but then also assesses the quality of the communication process among the participants (“How do they speak to one another?”). The concrete quality of the interaction is more than an emergent, interactive, and situationally limited phenomenon (Loos and Schäffer 200, 101). The group and its process of communication are perceived to represent the structures of the collective process, which surface in group discussion. Group discussion articulates the “collective pattern of orientation,” which refers to and documents the shared realm of experience. The intensive, ongoing methodological debate has resulted in a large number of books (Loos and Schäffer 2001; Lamnek, 2005) and articles (cf. e.g. Liebig and Nentwig-Gesemann 2002; Bohnsack 2003; Bohnsack and Przyborski 2010) and a few anthologies (cf. e.g. Bohnsack, Przyborski and Schäffer 2010).

---

### 3. Female Union Members – An Exemplary Analysis

---

The group discussion method, which has become a proven approach in qualitative social research on a range of topics (see e.g. the study by Leithäuser and Volmerg 1983, 1988; Morgenroth 1990) was applied in the early 1990s in a

study of membership commitment to unions with explicit reference to this research tradition and based on an awareness that the methodology allows accessing deeper, emotional layers of meaning among participants. The main focus of the research was participation needs and organizational interests. The question was, what do union members expect of their organization and what motivates their commitment to it? In a time of eroding significance of unions in society, this perspective promised insight into the basic interests of union members (cf. Morgenroth, Niemeyer and Hollmann 1994; Morgenroth 1996). Based on a large number of group discussions conducted at educational events for union members, the study aimed to shed light on the informal processes of opinion formation and the general mood among union membership. Some of these groups were single-gender groups. In the vast amount of data from the groups made up of women only, there were some peculiarities initially not considered in the results reported, representing a gnawing challenge waiting to be tackled at some point in time.

One of the themes was the high priority that the female group participants gave the problems of reconciling career and family. Of course, the topic as such is hardly surprising; what amazed the researchers was rather how the problem was addressed. One observation was that in the single-gender groups the participants repeatedly raised demands that unions, in the interest of their female membership, ought to press for more opportunities for women to work nights. "It would be the ideal working hours for me," a female worker and single parent commented the issue.<sup>1</sup> Although the topic raised considerable controversy, especially young women championed night work as a high-priority solution to problems of reconciling career and family.

The demand for night shifts for working mothers voiced by union women posed a number of questions for the researchers: What does it tell us about everyday life and the problems of reconciling family and work? Does it allow drawing conclusions about the role of gainful employment in their conception of life? Is the demand of strategic significance for women's policy in an organization largely aligned along androcentric principles?

Two observations stand out: Although the demand is regularly raised in discussions among women, it is not mentioned in any of the mixed groups. This suggests that the topic is consistently given high significance by female group participants. In terms of its substance, the researchers initially perceived the demand as an ill-considered surrender of labor protection rights; from a psychological viewpoint, it was interpreted as denying existing limits for workload.

However, precisely this boundlessness is puzzling. The women participating in the discussions were well aware of the fact that no one can suspend the day-

---

<sup>1</sup> Data from 12 group discussions is available only in the German language. All quotations from empirical data have been translated by the author.

night rhythm and completely go without rest for any length of time. Hence, there must be more to the demand; it must possess some latent meaning. Not least because even abolishing the ban on night work for women in manufacturing, which still existed in Germany at the time, would not solve the problems experienced by women in reconciling career and family. This verbal figure must therefore be viewed as bearing a specific meaning. But how do we get to the bottom of the meaning of this demand? How might we interpret such a phenomenon?

In the following, I will address this issue based on empirical data from group discussions. For purposes of demonstration, let me present a typical text sequence from one of the female groups (Group discussion 11, December 1994, 37; all names and other identifying details have been anonymized). All of the women are members of influential unions and were participating in an educational event for union members.

Anneliese (age 51, 2 children): "At the time when this action plan for the advancement of women was presented to us at the representatives meeting, the main works council representatives concerned with women's issues sat there up front and introduced it to us. Among other things, they said that once the advancement plan is accepted young girls getting into metalwork must expect to do night shifts if they want to advance their careers or get more training. ...

And that is going to happen. That rankled me deep down inside. ...

There were about, two hundred women were there, only women ...

So I stood up and asked, there were a lot of young women there who had just completed training to become a metalworker, if they had known before they started their apprenticeship that they would have to work nights, would they have still chosen this career? The women immediately stood up and said, 'Yes.' I was brushed off. In my view, they are not aware yet what that means ... as a woman, if I have children, to work at night."

Laura (age 23, 1 child): "For me, that would be a lot better."

Anneliese: "You are saying that now ..."

Renate (age 32, 3 children): "That's what you think."

Anneliese (simultaneously): "You are saying that now girl."

Frieda (aged 52, 4 children): "That's what you think."

Karin (aged 32, 1 child): "I wouldn't want to leave my son alone at night."

Laura: What?

Frieda: "For one and a half hours, er, years I al-, nights."

Karin: "I wouldn't want to leave my son alone at night" (simultaneously)

Anneliese: "You come home in the morning and take your child to kindergarten ..."

Laura: "Nah."

Anneliese: "Then you have to see to it that you pick it up again at noon."

Laura (simultaneously): “Nah, in school it’s okay. For me it would be the ideal working hours. I mean I don’t think it would be good for me physically ...”

Karin: “Let something be wrong with them at night? Wake up, bad dreams, or something like that, and nobody’s home.”

Anneliese: “And it’s a proven fact that ... shift work is er bad, and now there will be night shifts on top of that.”

Karin (simultaneously): “Something can always happen.”

Anneliese: “Well, I refuse to accept in principle ...”

Karin (simultaneously): “Something can always happen.”

Anneliese: “... that this night shift for women, that it again, no way!”

Renate: “I think it’s great. [...]”

Frieda: “Er, working nights sounds good to me. ... Gosh, I’ll be at home during the day. ...”

Laura: “But how long did the unions have to fight for women no longer having to work nights.”

Anneliese: “The unions didn’t fight for it, it is the law, it’s a federal law. ... There still is night work. Only night shifts in manufacturing have been prohibited. Other employees are allowed to work nights.”

What information is contained in the literal text? What is explicitly stated (logical understanding)? This is a longer sequence where a group of women is engaged in a lively conversation about an evidently highly charged issue. Anneliese starts by reporting that she had participated in a meeting at the company she works for (Volkswagen). At the meeting, an action plan for the advancement of women was introduced that intends for women to work night shifts in production. Outraged, she publicly criticizes this change (at a meeting with worker representatives) but is forced to realize that among the 200 young women at the meeting, many are not opposed to working at night at all, thus refuting her position (“I was brushed off”). She is upset about this and emphasizes that these young women are unable to fully grasp yet what is in store for them in the future and thus are naïvely in favor of night work.

Some of the others, clearly and briefly, take a favorable stance, with Laura leading the way by stating that night work would be the “ideal working hours” for her. She is supported by Renate (“I think it’s great”), whereas Karin voices concern that she would not want to leave her child alone at night because of looming dangers demanding motherly presence.

To underscore her position, Anneliese concludes by pointing to the known risks involved in shift work, which she believes will now be further increased by the adverse effects of night work. Apparently, this makes Laura think about naïvely supporting night work and causes her to reflect on the importance of the historically hard-fought labor rights for the protection of women. This leads Anneliese to add another argument: She directs attention to the law prohibiting

night work for women (and, interestingly enough, denies the role of unions in the struggle to establish it).

We can discern three different positions:

- Anneliese represents the committed union member who champions labor rights for the protection of women, thus pointing to the differences in women's lives compared to men.
- Laura and Renate appear as young female workers and mothers who have the energy to also work at night and favor this solution in the interest of the actual opportunities to reconcile career and family. Indirectly and *de facto*, they are therefore advocating formal equality between men and women on the shop floor.
- Karin argues quite vigorously for a third position, not so much from the stance of an employee but a mother concerned about her children's well-being. Displaying a certain compulsiveness, she repeatedly expresses the same concern, stressing the need for a mother to be with her child, at least during the night.

Hence, in this group, not only different women face one another but also different union positions, perhaps even different generations. Champions of women's labor rights, operating on assumptions of difference, meet advocates of formal gender equality (equal rights, equal responsibilities) while the two are complemented by the concerned mother.

Can we identify characteristic features in the way the conversation is conducted? How do the participants speak (psychological understanding)? The liveliness of the discussion stands out. All the participants spontaneously and passionately take a stance. However, the contributions are of a very different kind. The nature of Anneliese's introduction is that of a "speech" – a consistent and complete narrative, a vivid report of a past event. (Works meeting, the work councils make an announcement, she objects and receives no support from the other women attending). She is disappointed and now is apparently trying to receive some of the support from this casual group of colleagues that she failed to get at the time. The intention is clearly discernible, as if she wanted to say, "Isn't it incredible?"

All the other statements in that sequence are brief and concise, almost like throwing in remarks to comment the speaker. Those statements, however, are of very different content: While Laura, supported by Renate, stresses the ideal nature of nightly working hours, Karin's focus on motherly concern leaves her no choice but to oppose night work. In this short sequence, Karin speaks five times, always driven by the concern that something terrible might happen to her child while she is at work.

Although they adopt controversial positions, the discussion remains attuned to reaching an understanding about the arguments put forward and is remarkably unaggressive. The women are not quarreling but stringing together argument upon argument like a pearl necklace.



This group of women has more in common than what separates them. They are mothers, thus rendering the topic of reconciling career and family equally important to all of them. They all suffer from the pressures arising from this situation. Moreover, we can sense an undertone of anxiety that they might not be able to meet their children's needs or run the risk of exhausting themselves over time. They are also all union members and hence share a willingness to be involved in labor interest representation and actively support the cause of female workers.

Apparently, there is also agreement among this group of women as to what is omitted from their conversation. This directs our attention to what remains unspoken. It is striking that men are absent here; they are mentioned neither in the private context nor as colleagues or union representatives. Likewise, gender relations as such are not an issue either; neither are the unions and their (working time) policies.

Union women are fully capable of voicing demands. The point here is that they do so in the form of two controversial demands: maintain labor protection rights versus enable night work, which is to say, establish formal equality! The relation between the spoken and unspoken doubtlessly has a special significance, which we will trace later on when we explore the deeper layer of meaning by means of scenic understanding.

---

#### 4. Psychoanalytic Theories of Groups: On the Constitution of the Unconscious in Groups

---

The urgency and frequency with which the topic of night work surfaces in the various groups of women lends evidence to the assumption of there existing some latent meaning determining a dynamic that the women are unaware of. We can preliminarily assume there to be an underlying (unconscious) theme connected with this demand for night work that affects all groups in similar ways. Of course, an unconscious group dynamic cannot be measured, counted, or observed just as we cannot directly identify an unconscious theme of a group in the literal meaning of a text.

What then may we base considerations on when we claim the existence of such an unconscious dimension in groups? Concerning the group discussion method, there are two main references that come to mind, namely the insights from psychoanalytical group therapy (Foulkes 1964, 1975) as well as Lorenzer's (1970, 1977, 1986) broadening of psychoanalysis by including considerations from interaction theory.

With psychoanalytical group therapy, Foulkes formulates a concept of group analysis based on the realization that "Man's social nature is an irreducible basic fact" (1964, 151). This consequently leads to a group-based view of the individual in the wider context of its social conditions of life. The advocates of

this line of psychoanalysis systematically move the social group to the center of analysis, which allows studying the human psyche as a social phenomenon. The perspective on group processes developed here treats the whole group as an entity in its own right. The individual and the group are inseparably linked and form a dynamic whole. Hence, each thought voiced by an individual participant invariably tells us something relevant about the condition of the group as a whole. This interplay gives rise to what Foulkes refers to as a group matrix.

Everything under observation is taken as communication, whether verbal or nonverbal behaviour, and therefore in need of interpretation. This rests on the notion that everything can be taken as an associative response, a reaction against or an unconscious interpretation of what was happening. Everything is seen as meaningful (in the light of the total context of the group). For this the concept of a group matrix, both pre-existing as well as dynamically evolving during the group's procedure, has proved to be very fruitful (Foulkes 1975, 172).

Based on internalized family dynamics, group members unconsciously bring their important experiences in life as background to the group. Since each group member seeks to play the role it has internalized and push other participants into positions occupied by family members in experiences in the past, unresolved issues and problems in the individual's past surface once again. In this way, the current group setting gives rise to a jointly created web of transferences and counter-transferences of a new quality. An individual member who draws all the attention of the group or group leadership becomes a sort of node in the group network. Each individual event becomes a figure grounded in the overall figuration of group events. When we transfer this conception to the group discussion as a method of qualitative research, this means that we must also direct our attention to the group as a whole and that individual activity or inactivity takes on different significance from this perspective. The group theme is not an individually voiced opinion; the demand for night work is an emotionally charged topic for all the participants. The vivid interaction and the intensity involved in the quite controversial statements indicate that the women's main concern is not necessarily reaching some kind of common agreement on the issue. What appears to be the common denominator among them is the struggle to come to terms with the topic in a way that does it justice.

In group analysis, we speak of a group theme that evolves from an unconscious fantasy: The group coalesces around a commonly shared basic assumption, which from then on determines the dynamics of group development to a high degree (cf. Bion 1961). As in analyzing the individual, the observation of group processes must pay particularly close attention to the specific manner in which unconscious themes are enacted. In group analysis, too, this involves applying psychoanalytic methodology, the observation of transference and counter-transference, as well as temporary identification with the occurrences in the group. Searching for the common group theme helps in grappling with these often problematic processes since it provides an overarching explanation

for the various phenomena observed in a group and allows to perceive divergent aspects as expressions of a unified whole. The common group theme offers a way of tracing very heterogeneous, contradictory individual phenomena to a common, typically unconscious concern shared by all participants. The unconscious group theme thus represents a collectively shared experience arising from common conditions of life and work.

In the group discussions with union women, the remarkable presence of topics revolving around the problems of reconciling career and family stands out. The ongoing imbalance in the distribution of reproductive labor results in pressure and predicaments that form a common basis of subjective experience they can all connect to. This common experience determines how the predefined topic of “what is expected of union policy” is discussed in the group. The emotions associated with this pressure are unconscious drivers in this respect: We find signs of fearing failure and of translating suffering and distress into accusations. The unconscious group theme is apparently this: As women, we carry multiple burdens, and no one in the union acknowledges the problem. Not even our husbands. We are hence left alone with this problem. But we are aware of each other; we know that we are all in the same situation. This awareness unites us, but unfortunately does not empower us.

The unconscious assumption is presumably: men do not understand this and for this reason will not support us. We are on our own. When we speak of an unconscious dimension of group processes, we must ask how the unconscious is constituted in a group. We can identify at least three sources fueling the unconscious dynamic of a group: 1. Each individual group participant’s unconscious; right at the beginning, in the constitutive stage of a group, the individually unconscious motives generally lead to a highly specific web of mutual relationships (transferences and counter-transferences) that can become the theme of the entire unconscious group process. 2. There are also unconscious elements in the relationships to the people who the group talks about (e.g. colleagues or family members) and also the scenes reported, which are enacted in the form of transferences and are thus revived in the situation. 3. As a third constitutive element of a group’s unconscious, we must consider the unconscious dimension of the institutional context. Unions still tend to revolve around the conception of the skilled male worker in full-time employment. This is the root of the absolute priority given productive over reproductive labor dominating the political paradigm of labor unions. We can assume that institutions perform defensive functions for their membership and, in so doing, contribute to individual and collective stability. They accomplish this, in particular, by creating hierarchical structures. However, the flip side of all defense mechanisms is that they restrict opportunities to make experiences.

With regard to individual development, the primary group, as a social environment, could only allow certain developmental potential to blossom. In the process of maturation, the individual thus developed specific defense mecha-

nisms in interaction with the group of which it is part. These will later form the foundation for any type of interpersonal relationship and ... for dealing with the world in general. In each new group situation, everyone performs the role they have learned as if on stage. ... Each new situation evokes old, familiar patterns of communication since they promise some degree of security while they involuntarily also bring to the surface the neurotic and undigested (Pühl 1988, 113; my translation).

This is the material that determines the unconscious group dynamics and then triggers certain defensive reactions. The emerging defense system stabilizes group structure and thus provides the group with an acceptable, socially viable way of coping with archaic emotions and needs.

We must therefore assume that each instance of social interaction also develops an unconscious dynamic. This is especially so in organizational settings where people are involved with one another with some continuity in long-term institutionalized relationships. Here, too, we must be aware that apart from the conscious level of intentionally controlled encounter and relationships, there also exists this other level of unconscious dynamics.

In descriptive terms, unconscious first of all means that the participants are not aware of something; they are unaware of the motives driving certain actions. At the same time, the unconscious can be conceived as expressing that which has been repressed and forced to deeper levels of the psyche because of representing impulses that are not approved of or accepted in social reality and thus do not constitute socially viable behavior. The fact that a certain theme regularly emerges in similar ways hence allows us to conclude that it has importance in the everyday lives of the participants as well as in the unconscious dynamics among them. This lends it a general significance that extends beyond the single individual. Breaks and inconsistencies but also difficulties in developing empathic understanding are signs pointing to unconscious elements. In case of homogeneous groups, repeated reference to the kind of content observed here clearly indicates pre- or unconscious elements shared by all group members but which have been excluded from the realm of the conscious. Familiar group phenomena of this kind point to the fact that every group develops its own distinct group culture and already does so in the first minutes upon coming together. A distinct way of communicating, a highly specific mode of defining the unifying theme, and the common thread running through the entire discussion are all empirically discernible manifestations of social reality, the highly specific nature of which can be explained by the fact that in similar circumstances and when facing similar conflicts in life, people may also opt for similar strategies of coping with conflict and similar defense reactions, thus relegating the conflict to the unconscious.

People invariably operate interactively; that is to say, they communicate with one another, jointly reflect on these processes of communication, and “agree on” common meanings. These agreements are sometimes only situational but often also of a more universal nature, extending beyond the situation

and the individuals involved. Agreements of this kind therefore possess more extensive validity and become represented verbally in a specific form, which, in accordance with Alfred Lorenzer, can be conceived as language games (1970, 161; 1977, 35). Drawing on Wittgenstein, Lorenzer views language as grounded in actual social practice and as a dialectical unity of language use, everyday practice, and the general worldview (cf. also Weber 2002, 126). The language game is thus the locus where it becomes possible to mediate subjective and objective aspects of societal structures. In this view of language games, language and consciousness are inseparably bound to social practice.

An intact language game, in Lorenzer's understanding of psychoanalysis, consists not only of manifest verbal utterances; scenic memories and fully unconscious motives also find expression in symbolic form. The language game is a symbolic representation of both inner-psychic and social reality. In social research, key sentences that are concise and right to the point ("I was brushed off," "For me night work would be the ideal working hours") can immediately be identified as language games carrying special meaning. Intact language games can also break down again, in a process of desymbolization, mostly under the pressure of conflict. Desymbolization means that the individual surrenders the once acquired ability to cast subjective structure in the symbolic form of language in an area where the person is torn by conflict. The ability to speak about an experience or an inner-psychic process is lost again in regard to the conflict-laden issue. This loss becomes manifest in the group process in the specific form of gaps and inconsistencies surrounding the respective issue or stereotypical repetitions, which surface in group discussion accordingly and thus not only represent "unconscious collective patterns of orientation" but unconscious constellations of conflict as well.

In view of our example, we must now consider how we might probe deeper into key theme of the text sequence ("pressure to reconcile work and family"). The participants are aware of the theme as such; it is verbalized and is therefore evidently not desymbolized. The determination the women display in attempting to reconcile gainful labor and family demands can be understood as their persevering attempt to resist the either/or structure forced upon them and integrate that which has been artificially separated. Somehow making the seemingly impossible possible can be a source of considerable recognition and thus satisfaction – a kind of narcissistic gratification. At the same time, it also involves a tremendous risk of shouldering too much while completely ignoring the need for rest and thus massively endangering one's health were this "solution" actually to become reality. Demands for night work for women in fact alienates female workers from their physical and mental capacities. The absence of a realistic awareness of their own limits, the lack of care in utilizing their own resources, and the relentlessness in ignoring their own need to recuperate is amazing. This directs attention to a topic that stands out for being absent: men. They are completely kept out of the conversation; the other sex is

not a topic. Accordingly, the relationship between women and men, as major social groups, is not mentioned either. Where are the men, fathers, partners, male colleagues, and work council members that are involved in the lives of these women? Gender relations are not discussed either – there is a tacit agreement not to raise the issue. Precisely this absence, however, demands an explanation. Here something has been banned outside the boundaries of what can be spoken about, barred from the store of what can be consciously represented in symbolic form. A topic that not only all the women are keenly interested in but also determines their everyday experience remains absent from the conversation in the group. The women create a scene absent of men and lacking a language for gender relations. What does this mean?

---

## 5. Scenic Understanding: Reconstructing Hidden Meaning

---

In communicative settings marked by desymbolization, our everyday understanding of language comes up against limits. The latent meanings implied in verbal figures are often new creations that take on a specific meaning of their own outside the boundaries of official, oftentimes gendered discourses. This new meaning is inaccessible to logical understanding. To make inroads into such newly created meaning, we need interpretive approaches that not only analyze statements in terms of logical consistency alone but are also capable of capturing the deeper layers of meaning involved. Scenic understanding has this special quality. It is fundamentally different from logical understanding, which is concerned with comprehending what is said (the spoken word is conceived as timelessly meaningful), while it also distinct from psychological understanding, which is geared toward understanding the speakers.

Understanding the realm of meaning is tantamount to being able to apprehend the relationships of the subjects to their objects and the interactions among the subjects. ... This type of understanding is not interested in ‘meaning’ as something objective that is separate from subjects. It grasps meaning only in terms of the actualization of the subject in the context of its social relations. Whereas psychological understanding focuses on the *actual processes* within the subject, the kind of understanding we are speaking of here is concerned with the subject’s own conceptions, namely in that it perceives the conception as the realization of relationships, as the enactment of interaction patterns. This mode of understanding shall therefore be called ‘scenic understanding’ (Lorenzer 1970, 107f.; my translation).

The primary setting for scenic understanding is the psychoanalytic treatment situation. With “consistent attentiveness,” the analyst notes all the utterances of the freely associating patient. In the process, a “common thread” becomes discernible, tying together the individual events reported. This common thread allows tracing the various ideas and different levels of perception to the wider context of meaning surrounding the situation and the rules governing the pat-

terns of interaction. Scenic understanding draws on information and perceptions from different levels. In analytic treatment, the levels referred to are the specific therapeutic relationship, the present situation of the patient, and the patient's reported early life history. In research contexts, we can distinguish different areas of hermeneutic interpretation accordingly: Here, too, there is 1. the present situation among the group, 2. information about the current circumstances in the life of each individual participant (e.g. child care) and, as the case may be, 3. reports on past events (worker representatives meeting). Interview texts therefore contain information on the here and now of the group, the present circumstances surrounding the lives of the group members, and on past events in their lives – events that are verbalized by people who have much in common (cf. Morgenroth 2010, 276).

The concept of language games as symbolic interaction is perfectly suited for analyzing the social reality of gender inequality and the gendered nature of symbols. The gender relations implicit in the language game are grounded in the subjective experiences of a lived reality and are hence an expression of societal practice. This practice includes experiences of inequality and discrimination, especially in cases where they are split off and relegated to the unconscious; in language games they remain present, even if only by way of omission. The hierarchical, asymmetric system of gender relations will inevitably surface in some way in the language games created by women. In a single-gender group, the shared language game provides a form for expressing those particular experiences.

---

## 6. Verbal Figures Resymbolized: Metaphors for Political Utopias

---

Groups unconsciously seek as much common ground as possible – common ground of a scenic nature that can be grasped by scenic understanding. The more similar the social experiences among group participants and the factors influencing their lives are, the more likely it is that the verbal figures emerging in a scene represent a shared experience and, consequently, have a similar unconscious dimension. In our context, the high degree of experience of contradictions that working women face comes to mind. It is what they all have in common even though these contradictions may take different and highly specific forms depending on the individual circumstances of life. Their experiences are nonetheless structurally similar and find expression at different levels in a group. In our case, the level that immediately strikes the eye is the current group scene as shaped by the participants and their issue of concern. Of course, the circumstances surrounding the participants present lives, which they all share to a high degree, are another factor that can influence group interaction and may be of special significance for the textual analysis.

The burden of reconciling work and family unites all group participants. We can now conceive of demands for night work or for expanding rights to protect working women, respectively, as a collective phenomenon growing out of an already existing “subcultural consensus” about its importance among this group of working union women. The common ground is the enormous conflicts experienced in coming to terms with the difficulties of reconciling work and family. The individual predicament is experienced as time pressure and overwhelming demands. The supposed solution of working nights, supported by the young women, is a collectively employed verbal figure expressing the desire to live up to expectations in the two areas of life at the same time. Since the social organization of productive labor (based on neglect of reproductive labor) makes this impossible, the image evoked in this solution is one of suspending the rhythm of day and night. In the subjective perception of working mothers, their demand that the unions ought to fight for women’s right to work nights (a demand aimed at achieving formal equality) promises a solution to a structural contradiction in society that is also compatible with their conception of life. Facing the tormenting burden of overwhelming demands while insisting on the idea of bringing together what society has deliberately separated (and not wanting to give up either option), working women call for night work or for enhancing rights for the protection of women, respectively, as a way of expressing a collective will to find a solution. The female predicament gives rise to the political imperative that there must be a just solution to this conflict. As a collective demand, this imperative represents a resymbolization, a way of regaining a language to speak about the issue. This verbal figure also contains a vision identifying individual predicaments and situations of conflict as being rooted in society and representing a state of affairs that can be resolved in principle.

---

## 7. A Depth-Hermeneutic Analysis of the Issue

---

We may recall that the group scene revolves around three key sentences:

“I was brushed off.” (Anneliese commenting on the response received when referring to labor rights for the protection of women)

“For me nights are the ideal working hours.” (Laura on the solution to problems of reconciling demands)

“Something can always happen.” (Karin voicing concern about the well-being of her child)

We already noticed that the text sequence omits important aspects of the situation: the women mention neither men nor gender relations. This observation is a sign that a key topic has been excluded from the realm for which there exists a common language. Could it perhaps be that the women have failed in their



personal attempts or attempts within the union context to include men in addressing topics concerning the compatibility of work and family? Were they “brushed off”?

We can only make assumptions here. Yet the absence of such a perspective is so remarkable that it virtually calls for an interpretation. For Anneliese, being brushed off, even by women, is a frustrating experience. The legitimate concern of seeking solutions to the problem of reconcilability is rejected, and the attempts at establishing the issue on the union agenda fail. The sequence evoked vivid fantasies among the interpretation panel analyzing the data regarding the ridicule, mockery, and sexist remarks the women might have experienced or just the ignorance, indifference, or subtle disdain they might have encountered. Surely, it has happened more than once and has collectively discouraged them from further pursuing the issue. Traditional role stereotypes, especially of the kind prevailing in unions, tend to reinforce individual frustration and resignation. However, this does not lead to depressed passivity but to a kind of defiant opposition: “Ok, you’ll see, then I’ll manage on my own.” The combination of defiant self-assertion and persistent role stereotypes results in a state of permanent overload. The exclusion of political claims to solidarity (referring to fairly distributing the burden of reproductive labor) does not give rise to political demands that command the united support of women. What emerges is rather a common fixation on a collectively shared predicament. The search for a solution takes place as an isolated endeavor: each woman tries to help herself the best she can. Anneliese is the only one to propose a collective position, aimed at defending existing rights for the protection of women – even against young women who, while overestimating their own capacities, might surrender those rights without careful consideration.

Men are protected, not challenged – they seem not to exist. What are the factors operating here? The power of gender role stereotypes seems to determine the actual lives of the women to a substantial degree. They have assumed the sole responsibility for the private sphere, thus accepting the role attributions and, as it seems, uncritically internalizing them. Moreover, they act under the impact of the factual circumstances – they in fact face these tasks without receiving any support from their husbands, who also act in line with their roles and leave care work in the private domain up to their wives. This puts the women under ever increasing pressure since the work involved in maintaining the family and caring for the children has to be done. The demand for night work can therefore be interpreted as a metaphor to give the issue that has been excluded from the realm of language, the desymbolized theme of gender equality, a new symbolic form, at least to some extent; in this way it is resymbolized.

This resymbolization, however, must be deciphered. We otherwise run the risk of taking it literally. Were unions to take up such demands (which we have identified as resymbolized verbal figures) and take political action to that effect, they would be guilty of directly cementing the social contradiction accord-

ing to which women are expected to bear the double burden of productive and reproductive labor.

The collective willingness among many women to endure and balance the situation of both one and the other finds expression in the idea of night work. Working at night and taking care of family duties during the day is undoubtedly an individual imagination. The fact that it can gain collective significance nonetheless points to the collective nature of the underlying social contradiction, which the women share as a common experience. However, this newly created metaphor must not be confused with a politically viable language; it is an expression of the subjectively and collectively interlocked nature of gendered experiences: lived reality and subjective well-being, political vision and personal life are merged in this metaphor. What at its surface appears to be a political demand cannot simply be incorporated into the language of an androcentric organization. As so often in such cases of readjusting language and practice, this would lead to a host of misinterpretations and misunderstandings. If unions were to adopt this demand straightforwardly, they would cement an inhumane division of labor. Yet if they were to ignore it, they would violate the interests of their female membership. Women's conditions of life and at work demand explicit attention. The persistence with which the problems of reconciling work and family regularly surface and the large part they occupy in the group discussions is an indication of the pressure emanating from the underlying conflict. Only once we unearth the re-symbolized nature of the demand for night work are we able to lend it a meaning that does justice to the actual condition of working women: it is a metaphor, an image revolving around a core that simultaneously consists of a social structural problem, individually experienced suffering, and a vision of a political solution.

The union women as a group have reached an agreement, which they altogether remain loyal to: they move the issue of reconcilability to the center of attention! In persistently stressing the pressures involved in the need to reconcile both spheres, almost to the point of being insistent, they place an emphasis on reproductive over productive labor. The focus remains on reproductive labor even in the course of the controversy (although in different ways: defend protection rights versus night work to enable formal equality). Both perspectives argue within the wider context of the pressures women face in reconciling both spheres.

At the level of manifest meaning, the female membership's expectations toward the union can be read as the explicit demand for night work or defending protection rights respectively. At the level of latent meaning, we can identify the implicit expectation that unions must (finally) embrace issues of reconcilability as part of their political agenda of interest representation. Once we consider the unconscious dimension of this metaphor, we can see that the omitted and unspoken (e.g. reproductive labor) stands for the wish that the unions focus on overcoming the separation of productive and reproductive labor and thus

move a holistic vision of the working person to the center of attention. This ties in with the idea of transcending the separation of various spheres of work to overcome the artificial division of productive and reproductive labor.

In raising this issue, they are touching upon an aspect of union policy that contributes to a strategy of permanently invisibilizing the reproductive labor mostly performed by women. Drawing on Mario Erdheim (1988), we can speak of a societal strategy of *creating unawareness*. These women are taking a first step to revive awareness of the issues and longings that have escaped attention. Themes that we can identify are a holistic understanding of human activity, in which labor power must not be reduced to economically productive labor, and gender justice, to be achieved by fairly distributing the burden of reproductive labor. The overemphasis on the theme of reconciling work and family, which the women voice as a demand to be addressed by their union, is the concrete form in which the conceptions of life that have slipped into the realm of the unconscious and the utopias that reflect their hopes and have been repressed begin to resurface in the realm of the conscious as a returning scene. What is emerging in the group discussions of union women is a return of the repressed, which also bears political relevance for the unions.

Ultimately, the overemphasis placed on private care work (and the implications for social policy) implies the demand for extending the unions' scope for political action, for broadening their political mandate to represent human beings as a whole and not only those aspects of human existence immediately relevant to the labor market, thus reducing people to productive labor.

The women are demanding that the inequalities in gender relations be adequately addressed. In so doing, they have directly set course for a paradigm shift in union policy. Herein lies a crucial task for critical social research: to publish our knowledge about these issues that have been split off and relegated to the realm of the societal unconscious. The resistant fragments of repressed practice must be identified by understanding how they resurface in specific enactments, which requires deciphering and translating them. Only then can they be expected to become relevant for organizational policy. Knowledge of these processes must find channels into the respective organizations if those organizations are not to completely misconstrue the interests of their membership.

---

## References

- 
- Bion, Winfred R. 1961. *Experiences in groups and other papers*. London: Tavistock Publications Limited.
- Bohnsack, Ralf. 1989. *Generation, Milieu und Geschlecht – Ergebnisse aus Gruppendiskussionen mit Jugendlichen*. Opladen: Leske + Budrich.

- Bohnsack, Ralf. 2003. *Rekonstruktive Sozialforschung. Einführung in die Methodologie und Praxis qualitativer Forschung*, 5th ed. Opladen: UTB & Leske + Budrich.
- Bohnsack, Ralf, and Aglaja Przyborski. 2010. Diskursorganisation, Gesprächsanalyse und die Methode der Gruppendiskussion. In *Das Gruppendiskussionsverfahren in der Forschungspraxis*, 2nd ed., ed. Ralf Bohnsack, Aglaja Przyborski and Burkhard Schäffer, 233-48. Opladen: Verlag Barbara Budrich.
- Bohnsack, Ralf, Aglaja Przyborski, and Burkhard Schäffer, eds. 2010. *Das Gruppendiskussionsverfahren in der Forschungspraxis*, 2nd ed. Opladen: Verlag Barbara Budrich.
- Erdheim, Mario. 1988. *Die gesellschaftliche Produktion von Unbewußtheit*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.
- Fiedler, Anja. 2002. Kollektives kollektiv erfassen – das Gruppendiskussionsverfahren in der Diskussion. Review Essay: Peter Loos & Burkhard Schäffer (2001). Das Gruppendiskussionsverfahren. Theoretische Grundlagen und empirische Anwendung. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 3 (4), Art. 29 <<http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0204293>> (accessed November 29, 2011).
- Foulkes, Siegmund H. 1964. *Therapeutic group analysis*. London: Allen & Unwin.
- Foulkes, Siegmund H. 1975. *Group-analytic psychotherapy: Method and principles*. London: Gordon & Breach.
- Lamnek, Siegfried. 2005. *Gruppendiskussionen. Theorie und Praxis*. Weinheim: Beltz.
- Leithäuser, Thomas, and Birgit Volmerg. 1983. *Kriegsängste und Sicherheitsbedürfnis*. Frankfurt/M.: Fischer.
- Leithäuser, Thomas, and Birgit Volmerg. 1988. *Psychoanalyse in der Sozialforschung. Eine Einführung am Beispiel einer Sozialpsychologie der Arbeit*. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.
- Liebig, Brigitte, and Iris Nentwig-Gesemann. 2002. Gruppendiskussionen. In *Methoden der Organisationsforschung. Ein Handbuch*, ed. Stefan Kühl and Petra Strodtholz, 141-74. Reinbek: Rowohlt.
- Livingstone, Sonia M., and Peter K. Lunt. 1996. Rethinking the focus group in media and communications research. *Journal of Communication* 46 (2), 79-98.
- Loos, Peter, and Burkhard Schäffer. 2001. *Das Gruppendiskussionsverfahren*. Opladen: Leske & Budrich.
- Lorenzer, Alfred. 1970. *Sprachzerstörung und Rekonstruktion*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.
- Lorenzer, Alfred. 1977. *Sprachspiel und Interaktionsformen*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.
- Lorenzer, Alfred. 1986. Tiefenhermeneutische Kulturanalyse. In *Kultur-Analysen*, ed. Alfred Lorenzer, 11-98. Frankfurt/M.: Fischer.
- Mangold, Werner. 1960. *Gegenstand und Methode des Gruppendiskussionsverfahrens*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.
- Merton, Robert K., and Patricia L. Kendall. 1946. The focused interview. *American Journal of Sociology* 51 (6), 541-57.
- Morgenroth, Christine. 1990. *Sprachloser Widerstand. Zur Sozialpathologie der Lebenswelt von Arbeitslosen*. Frankfurt/M.: Fischer.

- Morgenroth, Christine. 1996. *Die engagierte Frau. Frauen in Interessenorganisationen*. Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot.
- Morgenroth, Christine. 2010. The research relationship, enactments and counter-transference analysis: On the significance of scenic understanding. *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society* 15 (3), 267-80.
- Morgenroth, Christine, Edzard Niemeyer, and Reiner Hollmann. 1994. *Realistische Utopien. Beteiligungsgewerkschaft als Zukunftsperspektive*. Cologne: BundVerlag.
- Pollock, Friedrich. 1955. *Gruppenexperiment*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.
- Pühl, Harald. 1988. *Angst in Gruppen und Institutionen*. Frankfurt/M.: Fischer.
- Weber, Kirsten. 2002. Aggression, recognition and qualification. On the social psychology of everyday life in adult education. *Småskriftserien fra Livshistorieprojetet, No.13, Institut for Uddannelsesforskning, Roskilde Universitetscenter*.